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An Occasional Paper

**Opportunities and Dilemmas for Women
Elected Municipal Officials in Massachusetts**

by

*Elizabeth A. Sherman
Susan H. Rohrbach*

December 1996

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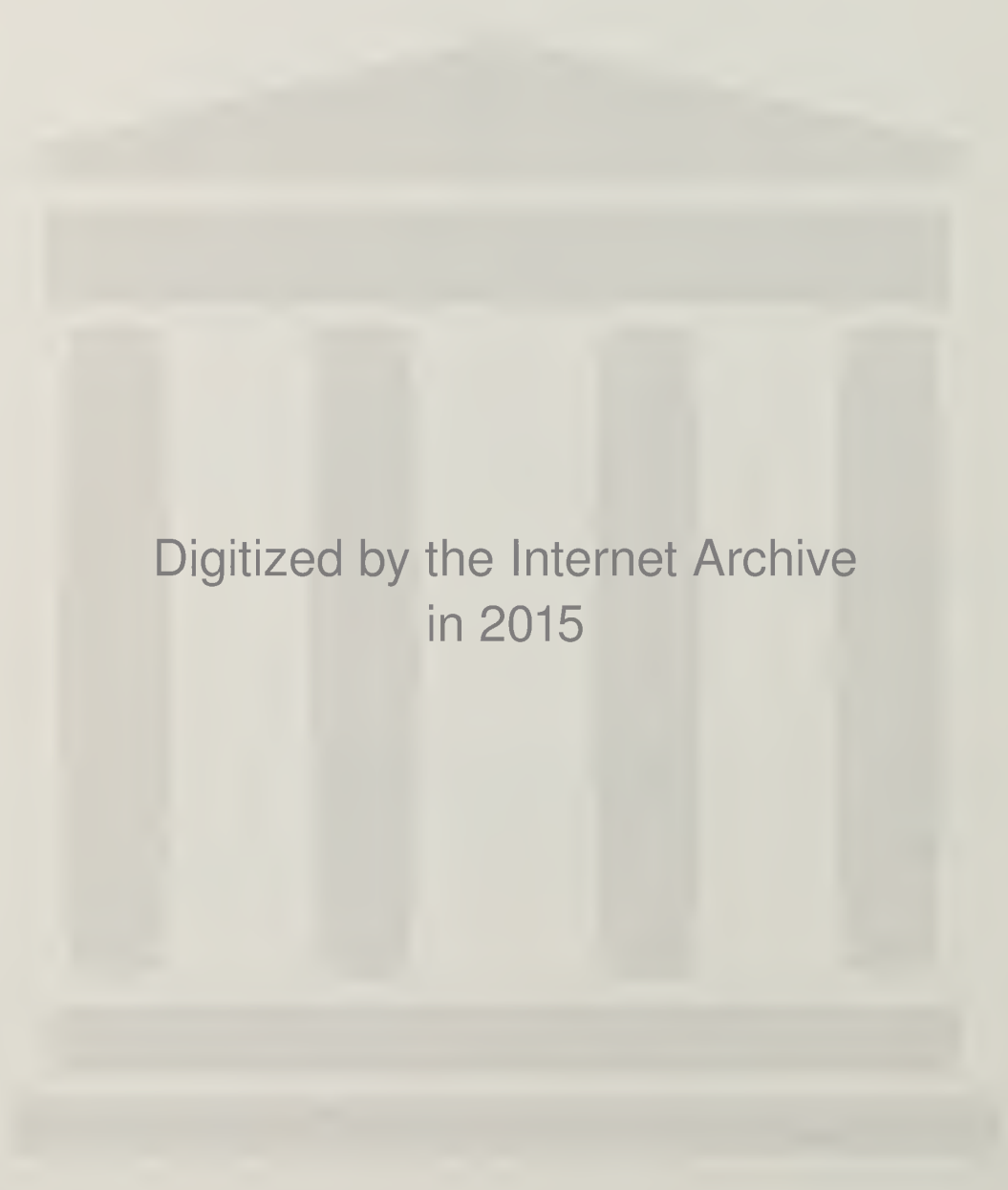
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OPPORTUNITIES AND DILEMMAS FOR WOMEN ELECTED MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Elizabeth A. Sherman, Ph.D. and Susan H. Rohrbach

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study was undertaken at the behest of the Women Elected Municipal Officials (WEMO), the women's caucus of the Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA), a state-wide resource, information and lobbying organization representing the interests of Massachusetts cities and towns. Founded in 1970, WEMO is one of the oldest associations of women public officials in the United States. With MMA support, WEMO promotes the leadership of women officials and sponsors programming oriented to issues and concerns raised by its members.

The purpose of the study was to determine what characteristics women elected at the local level feel they bring to their positions, to understand what inspires and facilitates their entrance into politics, and to specify the problems and opportunities they face as women officials. The topic holds particular relevance for those concerned with the progress of women's advancement into the upper echelons of political power in Massachusetts where, to date, only one woman has ever held state constitutional office, former Lt. Governor Evelyn Murphy, and where only three women have been elected to seats in Congress.

Hence, with no women currently holding statewide or congressional office, a salient research question is whether women in Massachusetts elected to town and

municipal office experience encouragement or constraints related to gender in their quest to be effective leaders and policymakers.

On the whole, the subjects of this study expressed deep satisfaction and a strong sense of efficacy as community leaders. However, the myth of a “farm team” of women preparing themselves to move up into the “big leagues” remains just that-- a myth. Despite exponential growth in women holding local office, few aspire to political careers statewide or as representatives in Congress. Gratified by the rewards of their positions in the community and perhaps daunted by the demands of campaigns for higher office, the respondents in this study expressed, for the most part, genuine satisfaction in serving their constituents locally and little inclination to run for higher offices. What is promising, however, is the significant growth in women achieving elected local office.

In 1994, 1,738 citizens served as selectmen, city or town councilors or mayors in Massachusetts of whom 330, or 19 percent of the total, were women. The lists of women local officials were constructed from the annual report of the MMA. For this study, surveys were distributed to all 330 women officials with 110 returned, yielding a response rate of 33 percent. Because of the relatively limited response rate the survey findings do not represent the demographic profile or opinions of all women local officials in the state or the country. Nevertheless, the perspectives voiced by the respondents serve as a valuable reflection of the experiences of a third of women elected at the local level in Massachusetts. When combined with the information gleaned from a series of focus groups conducted across the state, this study offers important insights into women in politics both as candidates and as elected decision-makers. These reflections also provide

the basis for more comprehensive follow-up studies, especially regarding the factors that encourage or inhibit the propensity of women to run for higher office.

The survey of Massachusetts women elected officials was comprised of open-ended questions which gave respondents the opportunity to comment at length on their experiences as women officials in a field still largely dominated by men. Their candid responses serve as subjective research data regarding women holding public office in the greatest numbers -- at the local level.

This study of women in local office in Massachusetts serving as selectmen, city or town councilors and mayors produced three major findings:

1. Women elected officials see themselves as different from their male counterparts on a range of qualities and dimensions, and they view these differences as positive.

The vast majority of respondents asserted that women bring particular strengths to public office, attributes they considered vitally important to improving the processes of government and politics. Women officials took pride in their unique leadership styles and in the specific qualities they claimed as their own. Frequently mentioned were compassion, integrity, balance, perspective and inclusiveness along with skills in negotiation, organization and communication.

2. Women officials continue to face obstacles running for office and governing, but they are confident in their abilities to overcome problems related to gender.

Women elected municipal officials expressed strong self-confidence in their abilities as political leaders and decision-makers in their communities. They acknowledged the challenges of balancing work and family, handling overt political conflict, and dealing

with troublesome sexist practices. Nevertheless, they were undaunted by such dilemmas, and strongly oriented to problem-solving. Despite feelings of marginality from the male “club,” they valued the leadership style of women, a finding consistent with prior studies of women in politics (Rinehart, 1991).

3. Women serve in local office because they want change in both the political process and in the content of public policy.

Women commented on problems with the political process indicating that they seek to make changes reflective of a “different way of doing things.” Dissatisfied with many of the practices they have encountered as elected officials, they expressed the desire that government become more open, more responsive and more civil. As their numbers have increased, women local officials have sought a more active voice in changing the content of public policy to attend to issues of particular concern to women. These findings support studies confirming women’s propensity to run for office because they desire significant change (Merritt, 1977), because “they care” (Witt, 1994), and because they seek to make a difference for women’s lives in shaping the policy agenda (Boles, 1991).

The survey responses suggested a distinct sense of gender consciousness, meaning an awareness among those who responded to the survey that they see themselves, and feel they are seen, as different from the norm, and that they face constraints as well as benefits related to gender. Perhaps buoyed by the overall increase in recent years of women in political leadership, the respondents expressed optimism about the increase of

women in politics and confidence in their own abilities to have an impact on both the political process and on the substance of public policy.

Many respondents admitted, however, to experiences of marginalization in the predominantly male world of politics from which they oftentimes felt excluded. Many recognized the need to address problems of sexism rooted in both institutionalized political practices and in the informal, social interactions of public life.

INTRODUCTION

This study provides information and insights related to the progress, aspirations and concerns of women elected officials serving on city and town councils, boards of selectmen and as mayors in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in the mid-1990s. It begins by presenting statistical information on the gains women have made in achieving local office both in Massachusetts and at the national level over the past two decades. The data indicate that, although women have made considerable progress in electoral politics, especially at the local level, obstacles borne of historical patterns of discrimination still affect the numbers of women running for and achieving elected posts. Moreover, these patterns are particularly evident with regard to the opportunities for women of color to hold elective office. As is typical of women serving in elected government posts across the country, the women municipal officials in this study were overwhelmingly white, highly educated and affluent.

Of the 330 elected women officials in Massachusetts, 110 participated in the study. Given the one-third participation rate, this study does not claim to represent the demographic profile or attitudes of all women officials in Massachusetts or the nation. However, the responses gleaned from 110 survey responses and three focus groups serve as important indicators of the subjective awareness among many women officials of the existence of differences between men and women in leadership styles and political influence.

The respondents offered frank assessments of the opportunities and dilemmas women face both running for office and governing at the local level. Three major findings emerged from their responses. First, women officials see themselves as different -- and

view their differences as positive. Second, they recognize a variety of obstacles facing women in politics but remain confident about overcoming them. And third, they desire change in both the process and the policy content of government.

This study discovered a strong sense of optimism and competency that women officials bring to the task of governing Massachusetts' cities and towns. Faced with shrinking revenues, demands for town services and contractual obligations to municipal employees, local elected officials today confront some of the thorniest political decisions facing politicians in American society. The respondents in this survey clearly value what they see as the distinctive traits that women bring to office and feel validated by using their skills effectively to address local problems.

Their accomplishments, however, are not perceived as steppingstones to "higher" office -- a hierarchical concept many women local officials reject as artificial. Most considered governing at the city and town level valuable and fulfilling in its own right, belying the notion of a "farm team" of women officials eager to play in the "big leagues." Indeed, this metaphor met with considerable consternation in the focus groups where women officials rejected the notion of "moving up" as dismissive of the vital work they were doing locally. They did, however, strongly support the idea of conferences and symposia bringing together women from different levels of politics to explore issues related to the problems women face in public leadership and management.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This study grew out of common interests between the McCormack Institute's Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston and the Women Elected Municipal Officials (WEMO) of Massachusetts, the women's association within the Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA). As one of the first associations of its kind in the country, WEMO represents more than two decades of sponsorship and encouragement for women local officials.

The Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy was invited to research the opportunities and dilemmas facing women municipal officials in the 1990s and report to WEMO at the January 1995 annual MMA meeting in Boston. Early on, it became clear that a study of women selectmen, town and city councilors and mayors (WEMO does not include school committee members) would encompass a remarkably homogeneous group of women -- white, highly educated and relatively affluent. Despite differences in ideology and approach, the women in this study were notable for their residential, financial and family stability. Women of color, poor women, immigrant women, women with young children and women in working class occupations, however, are far less represented in municipal elected office. Thus, this study is limited in its socio-political scope as much for the racial, ethnic and economic categories of women who are not represented as for those who are.

Several people helped to conceptualize the topic, organize the focus groups, refine the survey, analyze the data, comment on a succession of drafts and produce the manuscript. The initial research was undertaken at the instigation of WEMO and specifically with the encouragement of Maggie Adair and Geoffrey Beckwith, Executive



Director of the Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA). The Advisory Committee assembled for this project deserve special thanks: Nancy Thompson, former Chair of Women Elected Municipal Officials and Chair of City Council Agawam; Marcy Crowley, Selectman of Wayland; Rosaria Salerno, City Clerk and former City Councilor of Boston; Lisa Mead, Mayor of Newburyport; Representative Alice Wolf, former Mayor of Cambridge; Mayor Judith Robbins of Attleboro; Professor Eve Spangler, Sociology Department, Boston College; and Professor Randy Albelda, Economics Department, UMass Boston. At the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy, Dr. Carol Hardy-Fanta and Research Associate, Carol Cardozo, contributed material on prior studies and statistics on women in politics. Valuable editing by Research Assistant Jillian Dickert clarified the presentation. The John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs, and especially Director Robert Woodbury, provided valuable encouragement and support for the research and publication of this study. Professor Garrison Nelson, Visiting Fellow, assisted in the analysis of the data. Pat Mullen, Kathy Rowan and Madeleine Pidgeon were instrumental in the detailed work involved in the preparation of the manuscript.

WOMEN IN LOCAL ELECTIVE OFFICE

Massachusetts Trends. In 1995, women in Massachusetts held 19% of local electoral office positions—selectman,¹ mayor, city councilor—that is, 337 women out of 1,738 positions. This statistic represents women's slow but impressive gains in Massachusetts over the last two decades. In 1975 there were only 70 women in local

¹ While the term "selectman" may seem incongruous in the context of this report, it is the legal term used in Massachusetts. While several communities have changed from "Board of Selectmen" to "Selectboard" and from "Selectman" to "Selectboard Member", selectman remains the accepted term.

elective office, and in 1980, only 173. Thus, there are twice as many women holding city or town elected office as 15 years ago. Moreover, 36 of the 40 cities in Massachusetts had women on their city councils in 1995. Six—Lawrence, New Bedford, Attleboro, Northampton and Newburyport and Cambridge—had women mayors and six had women as city council chairs or presidents. However, as of 1995, there were no female elected officials in 125 of the Commonwealth's 351 localities, ranging from small towns in western Massachusetts to larger cities like Quincy.

Smaller communities in Massachusetts have experienced more growth in the number of women holding elected office than have larger municipalities, although the numbers in the larger cities and towns have slowly risen as well. For example, in the four Massachusetts cities with populations over 100,000—Boston, Springfield, Worcester and Lowell—women held ten council seats out of a total of 38 in 1995. (In 1978, only two women held municipal office in these cities). Of the 20 mid-sized communities in Massachusetts (population 50,000-99,999) with women officeholders, 12 had more than one woman serving on their city or town councils and boards of selectmen. Table 1 shows a sample of women's gains since the 1970s according to size of community in different regions of Massachusetts.



Table 1
Number and Percent of Women on City and Town Councils and Boards of
Selectmen:
Representative Communities in Massachusetts, 1975, 1985, 1995-1996

City or Town	Population Size	1975	1985	1995
Boston	100,000+	(1 of 9) 11%	(1 of 13) 8%	(4 of 13) 31%
Cambridge	50-99,999	(2 of 9) 22%	(2 of 9) 22%	(4 of 9) 8%
Chicopee	50-99,999	(1 of 9) 11%	(2 of 13) 15%	(2 of 12) 13%
Barnstable	10-59,999	(1 of 3) 33%	(0 of 3) 0%	(3 of 11) 27%
Wayland	10-59,999	(1 of 5) 20%	(2 of 5) 40%	(3 of 5) 60%
Acushnet	under 10,000	(0 of 3) 0%	(0 of 3) 0%	(0 of 3) 0%
Lenox	under 10,000	(0 of 5) 0%	(0 of 5) 0%	(2 of 5) 40%
Rockport	under 10,000	(1 of 5) 20%	(1 of 5) 20%	(1 of 5) 20%

Source: Mass. Institute for Social and Economic Research, town and city records, 1975, 1985. Mass Municipal Association *Mass. Municipal Directory* 1995-1996

In terms of leadership positions, women in smaller communities have also made greater gains than those in larger jurisdictions. Table 2 shows how many women held leadership positions—chair of selectmen, head of city council, or mayor—in 1995 according to the size of their community.

THE HISTORY OF THE
CITY OF BOSTON

Year	Event	Year	Event	Year	Event
1630	Founding of the city	1634	First church established	1636	First school opened
1639	First town meeting	1643	First fire	1646	First bridge
1650	First hospital	1654	First prison	1657	First court
1660	First library	1664	First newspaper	1667	First bank
1670	First college	1674	First ship	1677	First factory
1680	First theatre	1684	First school	1687	First church
1690	First hospital	1694	First prison	1697	First court
1700	First library	1704	First newspaper	1707	First bank
1710	First college	1714	First ship	1717	First factory
1720	First theatre	1724	First school	1727	First church
1730	First hospital	1734	First prison	1737	First court
1740	First library	1744	First newspaper	1747	First bank
1750	First college	1754	First ship	1757	First factory
1760	First theatre	1764	First school	1767	First church
1770	First hospital	1774	First prison	1777	First court
1780	First library	1784	First newspaper	1787	First bank
1790	First college	1794	First ship	1797	First factory
1800	First theatre	1804	First school	1807	First church
1810	First hospital	1814	First prison	1817	First court
1820	First library	1824	First newspaper	1827	First bank
1830	First college	1834	First ship	1837	First factory
1840	First theatre	1844	First school	1847	First church
1850	First hospital	1854	First prison	1857	First court
1860	First library	1864	First newspaper	1867	First bank
1870	First college	1874	First ship	1877	First factory
1880	First theatre	1884	First school	1887	First church
1890	First hospital	1894	First prison	1897	First court
1900	First library	1904	First newspaper	1907	First bank
1910	First college	1914	First ship	1917	First factory
1920	First theatre	1924	First school	1927	First church
1930	First hospital	1934	First prison	1937	First court
1940	First library	1944	First newspaper	1947	First bank
1950	First college	1954	First ship	1957	First factory
1960	First theatre	1964	First school	1967	First church
1970	First hospital	1974	First prison	1977	First court
1980	First library	1984	First newspaper	1987	First bank
1990	First college	1994	First ship	1997	First factory
2000	First theatre	2004	First school	2007	First church
2010	First hospital	2014	First prison	2017	First court
2020	First library	2024	First newspaper	2027	First bank

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Table 2
Massachusetts Women in Local Leadership Positions, 1995
(Chair of Selectmen, Head of City Council, Mayor)

Size of City or Town	Women in leadership positions
100,000+	0
50-99,999	6
10-49,999	30
under 10,000	32

Source: Massachusetts Municipal Association, Massachusetts Municipal Directory, 1995, pp.11-129

National Trends. Massachusetts shows patterns similar to national figures for women elected officials. A 1994 report by the National League of Cities surveyed 3,023 jurisdictions and found that 20.9 percent of local elected officials were women. A 1991 survey of all U.S. municipalities with population over 2,500 and some under 2,500 found that women tended to gain a higher proportion of representation in the town meeting form of government—almost 25 percent of the seats. (ICMA Municipal Yearbook 1993, pp. 70-84.)

The National League of Cities 1994 report, for example, found that women were under-represented in leadership positions. While women comprised 20.3 percent of all officeholders in cities with a population over 10,000, only 16.2 percent of these women were mayors and only 14.5 percent were council presidents. According to the 1991 survey by the International City Management Association (ICMA), of the 100 largest cities in the U.S., only 18 had female mayors. Among the 971 mayors of U.S. cities with populations over 30,000, 174 or 17.9 percent were women. The ICMA study noted that women were typically mayors in cities with a population range of 250,000 to 449,000 (31

percent) and of 100,000 to 249,000 (20 percent). Female mayors and municipal councilors in cities with populations over 10,000 represented 19.6 percent of the 23,729 mayors and municipal office holders. Sixteen years earlier, in 1975, this figure was only 4 percent (ICMA 1993).

A 1994 ICMA survey of almost 5,000 jurisdictions across the U.S. found that 94 percent of female municipal officials were white and that women officials' educational levels were slightly higher than their male counterparts. Five percent more women than men held college degrees. One of the few studies of Black women in local elected office found that, in 1991, there were 74 Black women mayors but they served in only 18 of the 50 states. Typically, Black women mayors held office in the South and represented predominantly rural, low-income areas (Jennings 1991).

Without question, women have made gains in local office-holding in Massachusetts and in the U.S., but they continue to lag behind their male counterparts in leadership positions held at the local level. Both the number and demographic profile of the women municipal officials surveyed in this study reflect these trends.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

This research began with a review of the literature on women in politics at the local level, followed by three focus groups comprised of current and former women officials. The focus groups were organized for the purpose of eliciting information in preparation for a seminar at the 1995 WEMO annual meeting on opportunities and dilemmas facing women municipal officials in Massachusetts.

The focus groups were convened by the McCormack Institute Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy in three separate regions of Massachusetts—Boston, Northampton and Attleboro. Groups of seven to nine women officials met to discuss the problems as well as the advantages of serving as women elected officials. Focus group members were solicited by mail and phone according to region. Approximately one-third of those invited attended the sessions held at the Northampton Unitarian Church, the Attleboro Library, and at the University of Massachusetts Boston. All of the focus group participants, including the two researchers, were middle class, educated white women concerned with the issue of women's participation in politics and government. It should be noted that participants were self-selected, meaning that by choosing to participate in the focus groups, they demonstrated an interest in gender distinctions in politics and expressed a positive orientation toward the role of women in public leadership.

The focus group participants were given the opportunity to discuss in an unstructured and informal setting the opportunities and dilemmas facing women like themselves elected to govern at the local level. Topics were often raised spontaneously through stories or anecdotes about exclusion from “the old boys network,” women's more open and less confrontational style, or how women experienced gender bias. Out of these free-wheeling discussions, several key themes emerged which formed the basis of a survey. At the WEMO workshop held in conjunction with the MMA conference in January 1995, panelists, commentators, university researchers and women officials elaborated on the themes raised in the focus groups and contributed more ideas for the survey questionnaire.

Inevitably, the refinement and distribution of a survey would be based on the concerns raised by women elected at the local level who constitute a politically active, well-educated and socially privileged cohort. The content of this research came to focus, therefore, on those character traits and behaviors that these individuals identified as relevant to the experience of women governing at the local level.

The survey questions were thus based on the issues raised both in the focus groups and at the WEMO workshop. It was mailed in March, 1995 to the entire universe of 330 women elected municipal officials in Massachusetts as an anonymous survey to insure confidentiality. The cover letter explained that the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy was conducting a study to gain a cross section of opinions and information on the opportunities and dilemmas of women who had the experience of running for and governing in local elected office.

Questions were designed to elicit information on the demographic profiles of the respondents and the extent of their tenure in political office. These were followed by 15 open-ended questions related to their political experiences, aspirations and insights as women local elected officials. Out of the 330 distributed, 110 written surveys were received—one-third of the total WEMO population. Of these, 13 did not respond to one question, and 80 were completed in full. Respondents left more than one question unanswered in 17 of the surveys.

The response rate of 110 out of a universe of 330 women elected municipal officials is low. Therefore, the findings of this study do not represent the opinions of all women elected municipal officials in Massachusetts, much less in the nation. Rather, the responses solicited from the focus groups and surveys provided valuable insights on the

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experiences and problems of 110 women officials across the state who chose to participate in the study.

Fowler (1988, 49) suggests, however, those who are most interested in the subject matter tend to return a mailed questionnaire. It seems likely, therefore, that the respondents who offered to share their experiences and perceptions reflect this pattern of interest in the topic. If follow-up inquiries had proved more successful, a more nuanced or diverse spectrum of opinion might have emerged.

Those who did not respond may well hold opinions contrary to the findings of this study. For this reason, demographic data, quotations and summaries of the data in this study consistently refer to information reported from respondents. Although the surveys were anonymous, the preliminary focus groups obviously were not. However, every effort has been made to insure that participants cannot be identified from the quotations and observations in this report.

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

The survey respondents were overwhelming white (only one gave her race as a person of color), middle-aged, affluent and highly educated. Besides holding local office, they led full lives that typically included jobs, families, and volunteer work in their communities. Most had several years of experience working in local government either in prior elected office, typically on school or finance committees, or in appointed town or city office.

Levels of Office. The respondents were selectmen (72.7 per cent); town or city councilors (24.6 percent); and mayors (2.7 percent). Out of Massachusetts' 40 cities, there were only six women mayors in 1995, and three of these participated in the survey.

The respondents tended to come from smaller towns rather than larger communities with 75 percent of the respondents from towns with populations under 50,000. Among those who served as city or town councilors, 59 percent were elected from a district and 41 percent were elected at large. In all, 84 percent of the respondents (selectmen, mayors, and at-large councilors), had been elected in city or town-wide elections, and therefore enjoyed a community-wide base of power.

Age. The average age of the respondents was 51. Seventy percent of the respondents were at mid-life (defined as between 40 and 70) and only six percent were under the age of 40. Three percent were over age 70.

Education. As a group, the respondents were highly educated. Ninety-six percent had completed at least some college education. Thirty-three percent were college graduates and 44 percent had completed at least some graduate study.

Income. The respondents represented a relatively affluent group, with 49 percent reporting family incomes over \$60,000 and 24 percent reporting family incomes over \$40,000. Fourteen respondents did not answer the income question.

Table 1 shows the distribution of income among survey respondents who provided income information:

Table 3

Annual Family Income: WEMO Survey Respondents, 1995

Annual Family Income	Percent of Respondents	Number of Respondents
Under \$20,000	2%	2
\$20,000-39,999	13%	14
\$40,000-59,999	24%	26
\$60,000-79,999	20%	22
\$80,000-99,999	10%	11
Over \$100,000	19%	21
Total:	88%	N=96

Source: Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy. McCormack Institute, University of Massachusetts Boston, 1995.

Race. Only one of the respondents gave her race as other than white, reflecting the small numbers of women of color in elective office in Massachusetts. For example, in January, 1993, there were only 30 Black elected officials—of whom 8 were women—at both the state and local level in Massachusetts, including school committee members (Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 1993).

A recent study of Latino candidates in Massachusetts found that in 1993, there were six Latino elected officials and three of the six were Latino women. Of these three, two were elected to school committee seats and one was a city councilor. In 1995, there were four Latinos in elective office -- all were city councilors and one was a Latino woman (Hardy-Fanta, 1996).

Family. Of those responding, 79 percent were married or living with a partner, and 78 percent had children. However, only one respondent had a preschool child, and the majority of respondents' children were over the age of 18. Respondents also reported

a high level of residential stability. The average length of residency in their communities was 28 years.

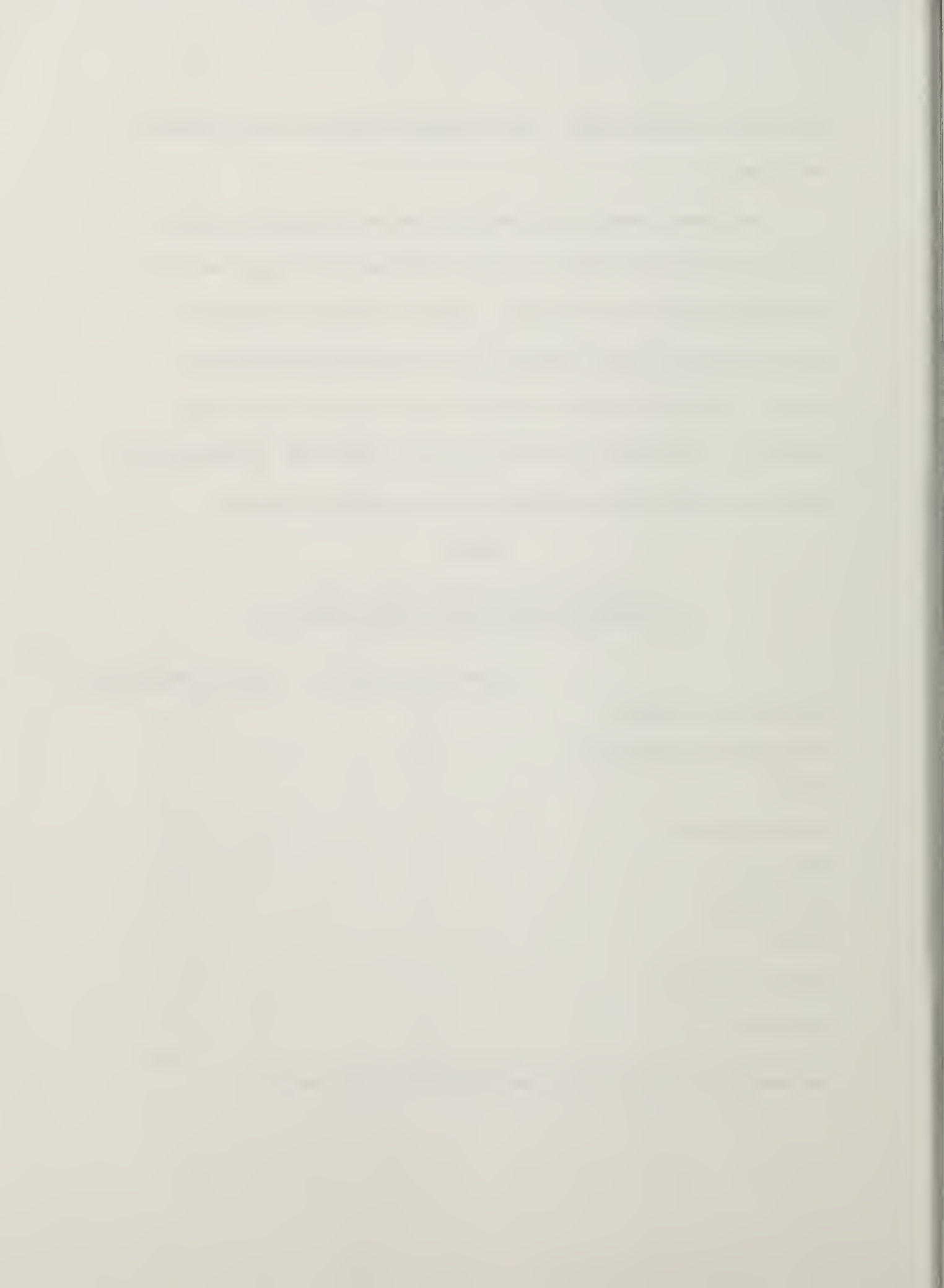
Employment. Among respondents, 88 percent were employed at paid jobs in addition to their elected positions (see Table 4). Their occupations ranged from attorney to retired state trooper to home health aide. Almost 32 percent had managerial or professional jobs and another 32 percent were in the technical/sales/administrative category. Six percent were retired, and only four percent described themselves as homemakers. The respondents were very active in their communities. In addition to jobs, family responsibilities, and elected office, 76 percent also did volunteer work.

Table 4

**Occupations Survey Respondents, 1995
Massachusetts Women Elected Municipal Officials**

	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents
Managerial and Professional	46	42%
Technical/Sales/Administrative	34	31%
Service	4	4%
Production, repair	1	1%
Homemaker	4	4%
Self-employed	6	5%
Retired	7	6%
Officials/Government	2	2%
No Answer	6	5%
TOTAL	N=110	100%

Source: Center for Women and Public Policy, McCormack Institute, University of Massachusetts Boston, 1995



Political Experience. Women mayors, councilors and selectmen were often experienced in other facets of local government either as elected or appointed officials. The respondents had served an average of five years in their present office and 61 percent had held previous elected or appointed office at the local level, for an average of eight years in prior office. The two most common offices held previously were school committee member (28 percent) and finance or advisory committee member (22 percent).

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Women elected officials see themselves as different from their male counterparts on a range of qualities and dimensions, and they view these differences as positive.

Of the survey respondents in our study, 89 percent expressed the view that women bring particular strengths to public office that are different from those of men. Only five of the respondents felt that there were no differences between men and women or that differences were simply due to individual characteristics. Women in the focus groups emphasized that women bring valuable traits to office, especially leadership styles that differ from those of their male colleagues.

This study echoes previous research on women in public leadership which suggests that women contribute particular qualities to governing that are different from those of their male counterparts. Several studies have found tendencies for women officials to be more cooperative, better at teamwork, more responsive to constituents, less hierarchical, better prepared, more organized, more skilled in compromising more consensual and more inclined to show compassion (Mezey, 1978; Flammang, 1985; Kelly, 1991; Rinehart, 1991; Beck, 1991; Witt, 1994).

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These findings echo Beck's 1991 study of gender distinctions on local councils. Beck's survey of elected officials in seven small suburban communities found that a majority of both female and male officeholders believed that gender differences existed in self-perceptions of governing styles and practices. The women in the study considered themselves better prepared, more diligent and more organized than their male counterparts. The women councilors reported experiences with discrimination and sexism, ranging from offensive language to being shut out of the decision-making process. They resented what they saw as "political backstabbing" and "power plays" which they considered part of the male style of governing. The male councilors in Beck's study felt that women made decisions based on emotion versus facts, that women asked too many questions and were too softhearted with constituents. The women, on the other hand, saw themselves as more responsive and attentive to details, which they believed made them better city councilors. The study also found men more apt to be annoyed with citizen complaints, while women felt that feedback served as a barometer of citizen concern.

The respondents in this study also specified what they saw as the strengths that women brought to office. For example, referring to herself, one selectman wrote, "*this woman brings a serious work ethic, compassion, nurturing, a sense of right and wrong way to do things, inclusiveness and fair play to the table.*" Another official claimed "[A] woman's perspective and attitude toward issues and process [are] often different than a man's." "Many people feel 'at least one of us' should complement every board for a different approach," said another respondent, indicating that a woman's point of view should be included in the deliberations on city and town governing boards.



While the survey questions did not ask the respondents to compare the qualities of women and men, the respondents often did so claiming that women bring superior capabilities or characteristics to public office. For example, one respondent wrote:

"Women care more about community and less about personal aggrandizement."

Another said that women have *"a better understanding of living within budgets, more patience in dealing with the public...and usually no great ego to feed."*

The respondents' answers to a question about the strengths that women bring to office fell into seven general categories of personal traits and political skills. The most frequently mentioned was compassion (39 percent), integrity (34 percent), negotiation skills (33 percent), balance and perspective (31 percent), organizational skills (31 percent), communication skills (27 percent), and inclusiveness (24 percent).

Personal Traits. Compassion, the characteristic mentioned most often, included terms like humanity, understanding of community, patience, and maternal instinct. Respondents wrote that women bring *"human strengths," "community understanding and concern," "the ability to realize the actual situation, not just the bottom line,"* and a *"softer, kinder approach."* In the focus groups, women officials asserted that their constituents thought they listened to them and cared about them. One went so far as to say she *"didn't want to be like the boys who don't care about people."*

Integrity, the second most important strength expressed by respondents, included qualities like honesty, commitment, independence, fairness, objectivity, and willingness to face tough issues. One woman wrote, *"I am a strong individual and will hold my position if I feel it's in the best interest of the people, no matter the cost. I'm also very honest and try to be fair."* Acknowledging that these traits are not the sole domain of

women, one respondent wrote, *“Although not exclusively feminine, most of the women I meet in town government commit and work hard.”* Women were also seen as *“being able to separate and judge fairly and independently.”* Some viewed themselves as outsiders but, ironically, saw that as an advantage. *“Not [being] part of an entrenched network,”* was seen as a benefit, as was *“decision-making based on fact, not who you know.”* Many focus group participants felt they were perceived as more trustworthy than male politicians, and thought that other women officials were viewed that way as well. *“People trust you,”* one woman said matter-of-factly.

Women officials prided themselves on their equanimity, described as having a sense of balance, representing a broader perspective, showing common sense, and not being part of “the old boys” or “the old political.” One pointed out that women officials *“weigh the options so as not to make hasty decisions,”* and have *“common sense [and] general concern for all.”* Another said, *“Women are good balancers. [They] look at everything equally and try to balance a good decision.”* Women bring a *“feminine perspective.”* They bring *“different ways of looking at issues and working with people,”* and *“another point of view.”*

This concern that all sides be heard was reflected in the high priority that respondents placed on insuring access of citizens to government. The survey respondents saw inclusiveness as a key aspect of women’s leadership style. Many referred to their accessibility and openness as well as the ability to see the big picture. One respondent wrote that women bring *“open-mindedness [and] willingness to involve others before making decisions.”* Another added that women are *“more approachable”* and offer *“easier access for timid people.”* Other respondents underscored women’s capacity to

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“think globally,” “see long range,” and “look at the big picture and integrate many aspects.”

Political and Managerial Skills. Respondents placed great value on their negotiation skills, reflecting a commitment to political compromise. The ability to build consensus, to work for common ground, to prevent ego from getting in the way of finding solutions to problems, and to maintain flexibility were all cited as skills that women bring to governing. Respondents wrote that women were able to *“resolve issues generally in a less confrontational manner,”* were adept at *“sharing and cooperation without a need to establish turf,”* could *“find ‘win/win’ solutions to complex problems,”* and had *“less ego, [a] less combative nature, [and the] ability to work together [and] forge compromise for the good of the whole.”* Women officials, they wrote, brought a *“willingness to listen to other ideas without having to ‘top’ them [and] the ability to change [their] mind without ‘losing face’.”*

Like the survey respondents, women in the focus groups felt that the best way to solve city and town problems was by improving the decision-making process. They saw themselves as consensus builders and negotiators and believed that they were seen this way by the public. Many women officials, however, were concerned that they might be stereotyped as compromisers, too willing to concede points to their opponents.

Good communication skills were seen as another advantage that women brought to their elected positions. Listening to constituents and to other public officials was highly valued. Women thought that they had *“better communicating skills,”* including *“listening instead of posturing.”* The focus group participants emphasized the importance of representing the views of their constituents rather than advancing their own agendas.

Respondents also recognized the importance of organizational skills which included “doing their homework” and being prepared, following through, giving attention to detail, and focusing on many tasks at once. Because “*women have learned to juggle many different agendas and wear many hats,*” wrote one official, “*we learn to look at issues from many different perspectives.*” Another said, “*I feel that the voters feel that women listen well, investigate more thoroughly, and 'nag' until an issue is brought to resolution.*”

Similarly, women in the focus groups saw themselves as “task-oriented.” They wanted to understand all sides of an issue before making a decision. Many also felt they benefitted from juggling the demands of career and family. A selectman from a small town who had been in office for 12 years while caring for a large family, selling real estate, and volunteering for “*innumerable committees*” summed it up this way: “*Mothers of six, like me, must be better organized than most.*”

In sum, participants in this study were very positive about the abilities that they had to offer and about the importance of the presence of women in political life. A selectman with nine years of experience in local government wrote: “*We keep our houses neat; we keep our business affairs neat. We tend to bring closure to things...[and] tend to attend to more detail. We make good 'town mothers.'* We nurture. We seek out resolution.” The consensus of the participants was that gender does make a difference. They clearly believed that women bring unique valuable strengths to office, and that drawing on these strengths gave them confidence in their ability to be effective leaders.

2. Women officials continue to face obstacles running for office and governing, but they are confident in their abilities to overcome problems related to gender.

Women officials, like their male counterparts, face many challenges in their roles as elected leaders in local government. Indeed, 60 per cent of the respondents said that they faced problems in office that they did not expect, although only 24 percent said that these problems had made them reconsider running for office again. Most of these problems were not gender-based. They included lack of privacy and time to spend with family, discouragement with local fiscal problems, and frustration at their inability to make headway against a long-standing power group.

On the other hand, many women officials acknowledged that they faced gender-based problems including sexism, exclusion from “old boys’ network,” gender stereotypes, difficulties balancing work and family, and dilemmas about how to handle direct conflict. Several women officials claimed that they often straddled a fine line between being strong and being seen as “a bitch.” And, because women were present in smaller numbers in local elected office, they often regretted not having other women at their level.

Despite these difficulties, the women officials overwhelmingly expressed confidence in their abilities to handle the challenges of governing as well as those associated with being a woman in the traditionally male world of local government.

Sexism. Notably, 57 percent of the respondents simply answered “no” to a question as to whether they had faced problems with sexism. However, a significant number, 43 percent, said that sexism did pose a significant problem for them as local officials. Sexism was described by the respondents in various ways such as being treated

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as subordinate to or less competent than men, but also as being subject to sexual harassment.

Some respondents wrote that they had experienced sexism when they first came into office. One local official remembered her first elected office 20 years ago, *"They told me that they kept the old records for the planning board in the men's room. I never used them, but just in case, I bought myself a key ring that said 'Men' on it!"* A woman who had been in office for two years wrote of her difficulties with town administrators, *"Some senior town employees do not want to take me seriously because they are not accustomed to taking directions from a woman."* But, like other respondents, she added, *"They have gradually adapted to the situation."* Eleven percent of the respondents reported that sexism interfered with their jobs. However, among those who said that sexism had been a problem, most saw it as something that women could work to overcome.

Respondents shared their strategies for coping with sexism. *"I have found it personally helpful to interpret sexist behavior on the part of some men as a clear indication of their own insecurity and consider myself 'stronger' than he is. In some instances, if it's worth a possible backfire, a move to capitalize on his weakness can pay off. In less extreme cases, it may be better just to work around it,"* said the chair of one board of selectmen. *"I ignore it and set my sights on goals I wish to achieve,"* said another respondent. *"I have found in my career and in life that sexism can be overcome by proving yourself. Do the job well and people will eat their words,"* wrote another town council chair. *"It's only 1995,"* concluded another woman official. *"We're all still dealing with sexism. It just has a different approach. I'm a pretty secure person, but*

every woman is caught off guard occasionally. You learn to handle just about anything when you're in the public eye."

"The Old Boys' Network." Many comments addressed the "old boys' network," even though the survey did not include a question using this term. While respondents valued independence and openness and did not indicate a desire to be "one of the boys," being "one of the girls" was often not an available choice. A respondent new to town government wrote that *"it takes more work to get the same information the men have on a given topic. Men make decisions between each other prior to the public vote [and I am] often excluded."* Feelings of being excluded may have stemmed from the fact that women elected municipal officials had a smaller peer group than their male colleagues. For example, among those women who held office in smaller communities (those under 60,000) the majority were the only women in governing positions.

Women's Networks. Recent studies have found that mentoring prior to running for office is more important to women than for men (Mellman, Lazurus and Lake, 1994). However, only 13 percent of respondents in our study said they had been mentored, and several decried the lack of mentors. *"No mentor...I wish!"* lamented one selectman.

Fifty-nine percent of the respondents answered that they had access to networks or were aware of organizations which facilitate women running for and serving in office. A variety of groups were mentioned from informal local community groups to formal networks at the state and national level like WEMO and Emily's List that promote women in political office. But fully 34 percent were unaware of any networks, or responded that there were no networks available. While about 38 percent described women's networks, over 21 percent said their networks included both men and women. *"None have ever*



approached me to help (if there are any out there),” said a city councilor. “I sure could have used help!”

Women's formal networks were the most important source of support for those who used networks (38 percent of respondents). Of these, the League of Women Voters was the most commonly mentioned (22 percent of respondents). *“Being on the board of the local League of Women Voters started my interest in local government,”* said a selectman from a small community. *“[The League] also was good training on issues, working as part of a committee, seeking consensus and public speaking.”*

Gender Stereotypes. Brown et al (1993) found that a majority of voters see men and women as equally capable, but a substantial minority still hold gender stereotypes. For example, women are seen by many voters as superior to men in dealing with social service areas, while men are seen as superior in handling traditional city services and economic development.

Some respondents pointed out that stereotypes can cut both ways—that is, they can work to the advantage as well as the disadvantage of women officials. Forty-six percent of the respondents said that being a woman was an asset when running or governing, and another 22 percent said that gender was neither a positive nor a negative. A total of 68 percent of respondents, saw gender as either an asset or not an issue. One respondent asserted that being a woman was *“absolutely an asset. People seem to trust us—may ‘we’ never betray them!”* Another added, *“The only thing that counts in the eyes of the voting public is your ability to do a good job representing their views—not yours.”* Another response saw gender as a neutral issue: *“From my personal experience, being a*

woman was not an asset or a detriment. The voters simply elected the best candidate to fill the position.”

Some respondents thought that voters were not ready for more than one woman on a governing board, as did some of the women in the focus groups. This dilemma was highlighted by one respondent who wrote, *“I’m the only one on our board so women voters are more likely to vote for me. The flip side is that my presence hurts other women seeking a seat on our three member board.”* Another wrote that she hoped another woman who was running would be elected in order to *“remove the idea that there is one and only one ‘woman’s seat’ on the board.”*

One of the survey questions asked was whether women experienced differential treatment by the press. Responses were mixed, as were opinions about whether the general approach of the press had changed over time. A selectman from a small community wrote, *“Men are regarded as leaders [by the press] more than women. What I say is just not perceived as being as strong or as important. I find well crafted and well thought out positions I take are rarely quoted while my male counterparts are quoted in bold no matter how clumsy or stupid.”* On the other hand, some thought the press sometimes pay more attention to women or give them more sympathetic coverage. As one official said, *“I am lucky to get much press because I am controversial in this community. People look for my comments because I have responded to them. They love an honest answer. This is my gift that my male peers are in ‘awe’ and sometimes angry.”* Still another wrote that she thought *“The press is less harsh and less judgmental when reporting on women in government.”*

Almost half of the respondents, however, said that women were treated differently by the voters, with both positive and negative connotations. There was some optimism about the future and considerable pride regarding how far women had come. Four times as many women wrote in their survey responses that treatment by the voters had changed over time for the better as those who thought it had not changed. *“Recently in local government we seem to be deemed the new hope,”* said one respondent. Women are treated *“somewhat differently but this, too, is changing. On the local level, women ‘run the town’ and are taken seriously,”* said another. *“I think some voters still will not vote for a woman,”* another wrote, *“though this has changed,”* she acknowledged. *“Thank God ‘the barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen’ mentality has finally died here,”* was another response.

Conflict. Many respondents pointed out that women have difficulty dealing with direct conflict or overt confrontation in the political arena. Fifty-one percent of the respondents acknowledged this as a problem. Twenty-eight percent felt women had no problem dealing with conflictual situations in the governing process..

Some wrote that women's style in dealing with contentious issues was different from men's, but not necessarily less effective. *“There are ways of using subtlety that just seem to befuddle men who are not used to that approach,”* explained a town councilor. By a two to one margin, survey respondents expressed the opinion that “being nice” is not a liability for women in politics.

One respondent added it can pose a problem *“only if you define nice as non-confrontive [sic]. I believe in always being ‘nice’. By that I mean polite, respectful, and, if necessary, firm in my desire to speak or make a point.”* Another wrote that in the short

term niceness can be a liability for women *but in the long term (which is what really counts) NO, because 'being nice' means I am thoughtful, slow to anger, looking for common ground—and I usually find it, and 'win' in the end.*” For women, the “‘rules of the game’ are different,” claimed another respondent. *“Being nice is not a liability; being naive is.”* Still another said, *“It is not necessary to be ‘down and dirty’ to be strong and stand for what you believe in.”*

Some respondents acknowledged, however, that being too strong or too directly confrontational could be a liability. *“A lot of the time if I take the nice approach, which [I] always try first, [I] will not be heard or taken seriously,”* said one official. At the same time, she explained, *“When I take the direct confrontation approach they label me, but they know I mean business.”*

The focus group participants discussed in detail how conflict could be problematic. Some found it hard to get used to arguing and political confrontation. Others felt guilty after getting angry and showing it. One city councilor said a constituent wanted her to be more forceful and asked her, *“Why aren't you thumping your fist?”* Another official found, however, that *“anger doesn't always play well.”* Many women officials in this study commented on the dilemma of how to be tough and strong without *“looking like a bitch.”* Women seemed to feel they had a narrower window of what was permitted as strong behavior.

Work and Family. Fully 63 percent of the respondents thought that balancing work and family responsibilities was a problem for women, more so than for men. Eleven percent indicated that women do not have a “problem,” but were simply better at the work-family balancing act. *“They [women] still try to juggle more things,”* said a long-

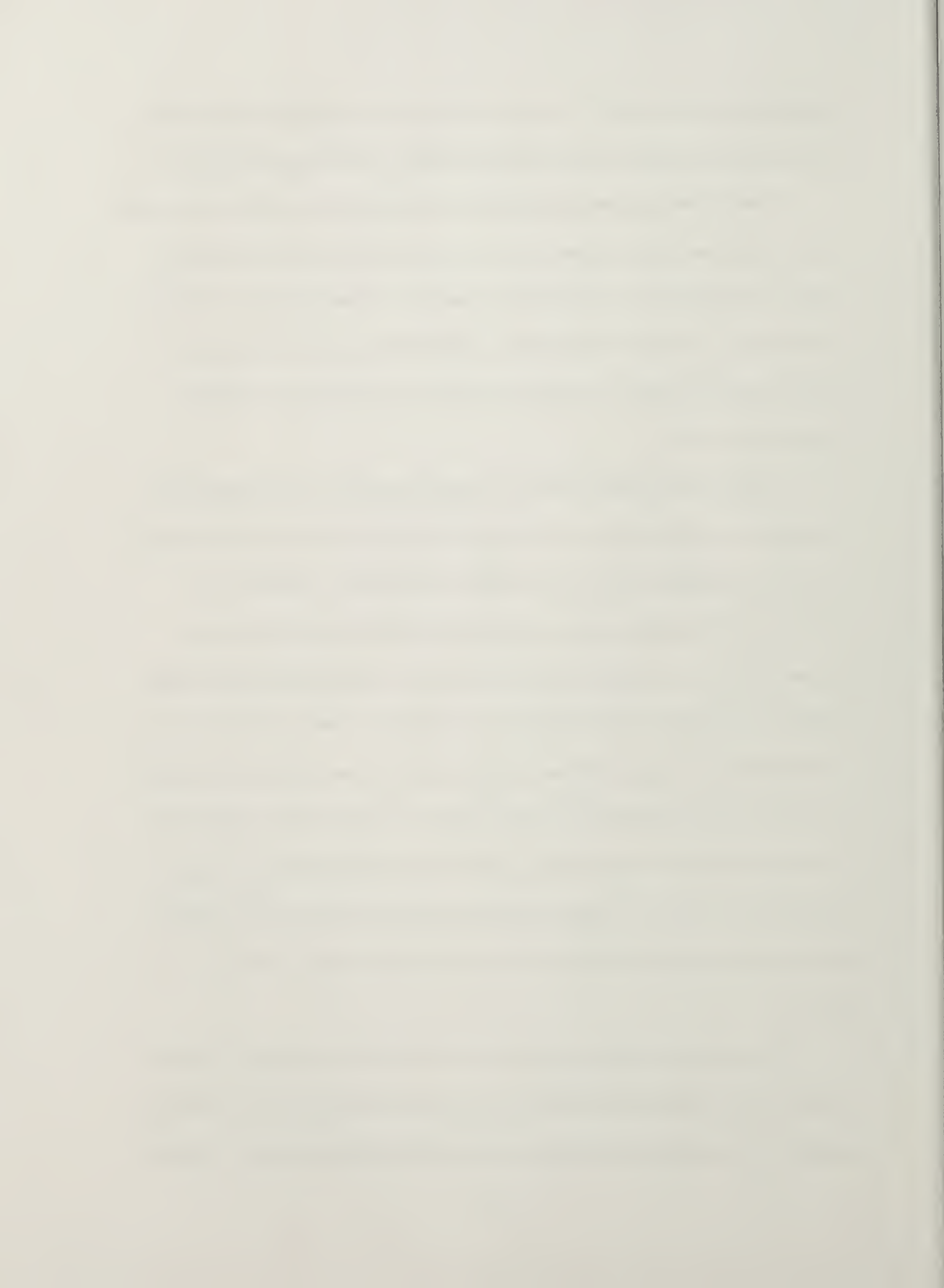
term selectman, *"I know I do."* A woman who had served as president of the city council and was also a management consultant agreed, adding, *"but then again I have 5 kids!"*

Some respondents mentioned that both women and men with younger children had a more difficult time balancing family and work, which may be one of the reasons why women in office tend to be at mid-life and to have older children when they run for office.

"Ordinarily, yes, [women find balancing more difficult] but for me, no, because my family has grown and left the nest and my husband is very supportive," answered a selectman in her sixties.

In general when queried whether they thought that women were hindered from moving into positions of power and authority at the local level, 87 percent said that they were not. Respondents were very clear and direct on this point. While the survey respondents recognized that women elected municipal officials faced problems, they believed that they were equal to the task of solving them, and they had positive feelings about the role of gender in local leadership. One official said, *"As one woman on [a] three member board I think it took an inordinate amount of time and energy on my part to become accepted/established as credible, influential, and not servile—therefore my work as board member has been harder. However, as a community leader I think my gender serves me very well. I seem to be able/willing to talk to people, solve problems, generally make constituents feel like someone is listening and doing something for them."*

In fact, a majority of the respondents identified themselves as leaders, whether or not they held a formal position of power such as mayor or council chair. In response to a question as to whether they had held a leadership position, 59 percent answered that they



did hold such a position, although only 32 percent said that they had been either the mayor, council president, or chair of the board of selectmen.

Respondents were optimistic about their strengths and leadership capabilities, and about the future for women in government. *"This country is ready for women,"* said an official noting, *"Good ones can bring a new perspective to the political scene."*

3. Women serve in local office because they want change in both the political process and in the content of public policy.

The survey respondents and focus group participants strongly indicated that women officials ran for office in order to make change in both the process and content of government. The women elected municipal officials put tremendous emphasis on "how things are done." They wanted the political process to change and be more congruent with their approach of governing—that is, to be more humane, more open, more responsive, and more civil.

Many of the women saw elected office as an opportunity to advance causes of importance to women, reflecting a gender consciousness or identification with the particular problems women face in society. Respondents did not focus on particular issues or describe their political persuasion. Rather, they described themselves and other women officials as having interests in common that cut across ideology and party lines.

It should be noted, however, that local government in Massachusetts is non-partisan and therefore party distinctions are not as relevant as in state or national legislatures. The survey respondents emphasized their discontent with politics as usual, expressing a strong commitment to making local government work better. Many were

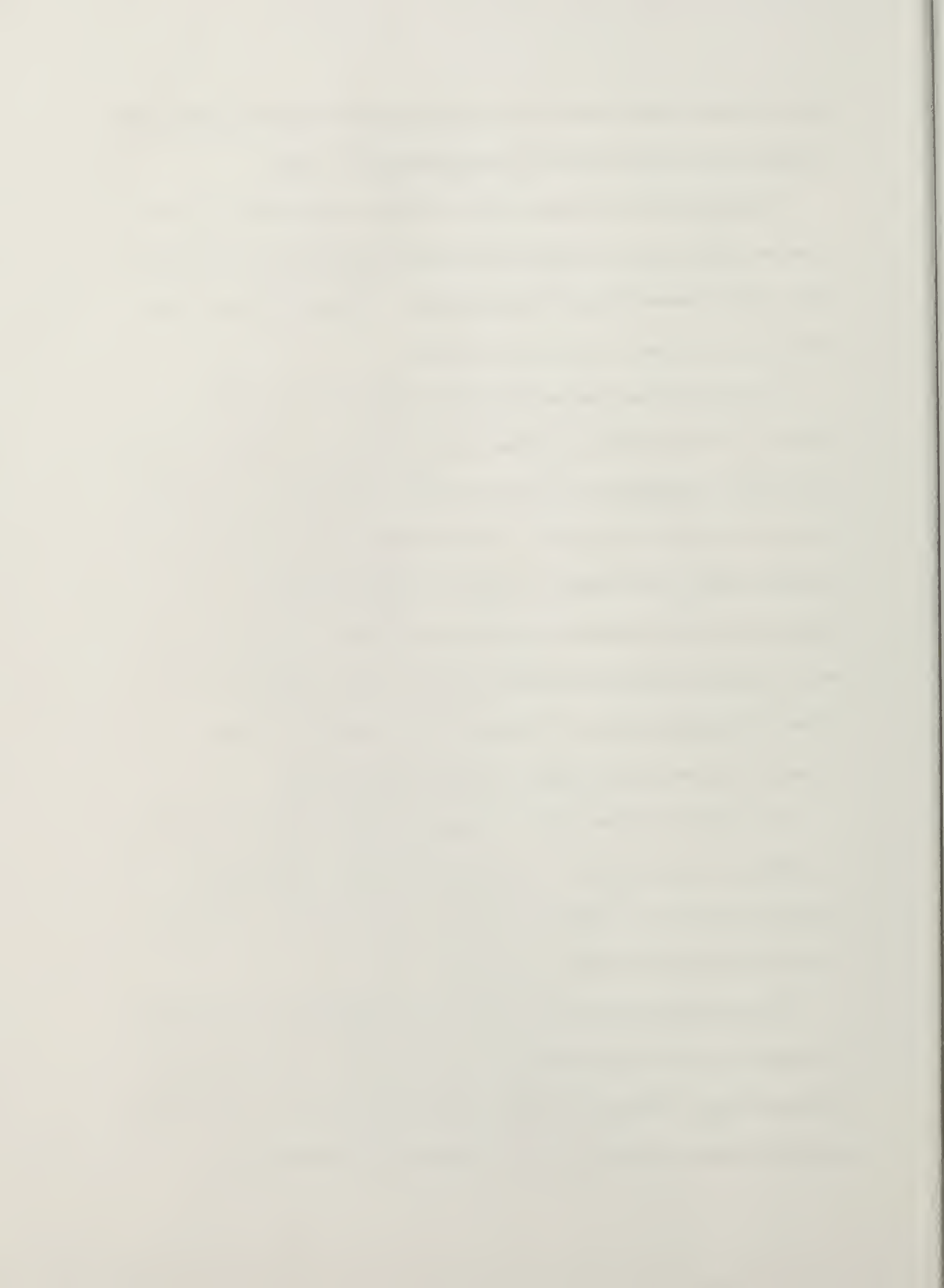
motivated to enter local government because they thought their approach to politics would be different and their skills were needed to bring about positive change.

Running for Office. Women in our study decided to run for office for a variety of reasons. Because they were already involved in the community, they saw the need for change, and they believed they had the ability needed to do the job. They viewed their service in local government as a long-term commitment.

The most commonly cited reason for running for office (23 percent) was displeasure with current policies, incumbent officeholders, or other candidates. *"The town was on the verge of bankruptcy and I was tired of the back room politics,"* one official gave as her reason for running for office. *"My town did not have the leadership and openness it needed,"* said a selectman. There were *"wrong doings going on,"* said another, who *"couldn't understand why a small town should be so corrupt. I felt it was time to bring balance and let people know what was happening. Open government!"* Another city councilor remarked, *"Local politics never seemed to think 'ahead'. Patchwork results needed to be changed. City Hall [was] not moving!"*

The second most common reason for running for office (15 percent) was belief in the capability of doing a good job. *"I was asked...to run because I demonstrated leadership, credibility, and enjoyed the community,"* wrote a selectman. *"I felt that I would make an excellent selectman,"* said another.

Other frequently cited reasons for running were an abiding interest in politics and government (13.8 percent) and the desire to be involved in public service (8.8 percent). Some saw running for office as a continuation of community activism (7.5 percent) while others noted concern about local education (7.5 percent), government finances



(5 percent), or the need for more women in public office (5 percent).

Changing the Process. Once elected to office, the respondents clearly wanted government to be more compassionate, humane and open, with less emphasis on back-room politics. *"Women have a better grasp of the need for a human face in government,"* wrote one respondent. One official said that she ran for office because she *"was displeased with the autocratic style of leadership [and] behind the scenes decisions with little public input."* Another claimed that *"old boy networks close around those accepted into the network. This makes resolving issues and having completely honest and open government hard to achieve."* Another said confidently, *"I believe in answering to the public on what I believe is right. I will not play political football. ...I have been a major part in bringing change to our community."*

The respondents' desire to change the political process to include more participants seemed to spring from their own experiences of marginalization and their consciousness of their own status as "different." *"In my first term as selectman, the male board members used to go to the men's room to have their discussions,"* said one respondent. *"I have a real sense that I will be allowed to stay in office as long as I don't step on certain toes,"* said another. *"Once I do that 'the boys' won't let me play any longer."* It is not clear whether this sense of being marginalized resulted from gender bias or simply from being a newcomer in an established group. In any case, many respondents identified with how others might feel being excluded from the decision-making process, and they sought to translate that understanding into a more inclusive process.

The survey asked if the women officials saw themselves as "public servants" or "in politics." The respondents clearly valued their role as public servants and saw their

political skills as a means to achieving the public good. Only five percent of the respondents said that they thought of themselves as strictly being “in politics.” Sixty six percent of the women thought of themselves as public servants, and another 28 percent thought that they were both public servants and politicians—“*public service in political clothing,*” as one respondent put it.

The women officials wanted decisions to be made by representatives with a balanced view of the community. One city councilor wrote that she built networks that were “*volunteer efforts on the part of both males and females in the community who believe[d] you are in the field for the ‘people’ as opposed to being ‘another politician’ there for the glory of it all.*”

The emphasis on public service stemmed in part from the fact that many respondents defined politics negatively. “*Unfortunately ‘politics’ [is] an impediment to public service,*” wrote one respondent. A small-town selectman and attorney agreed: “*Politics is a game in which accomplishments of benefit to the public may or may not occur. I do as much as I can stand morally.*” Still another selectman wrote, “*To be political is to be in a position that mandates one to calculate moves and decisions based on their long term effect on the future of one’s position: votes.*”

The respondents wanted local officials to be honest, independent and objective and to build consensus and work for the common good rather than for personal success (a tendency, along with a confrontational style, respondents often attributed to male politicians). “*Both men and women need to remember decency and civility—one to the other,*” said a woman who chairs a board of selectmen.

The focus group participants saw both negative and positive aspects to politics. Ideas about politics ranged from *“lying, cheating, in your face”* to *“a noble calling,”* and some expressed reservations about being a part of the widely disparaged world of politics. Others thought that it was necessary to be a skillful politician in order to be an effective public servant. As a mayor explained, *“as an elected official if I were not in politics, I would not be able to provide public service.”*

Reluctance about “being political” was not, however, synonymous with the perception that women elected officials lacked political skills. A survey respondent wrote that *“what I do is definitely public service, but it sometimes takes politics to get it done.”* Another said, *“I think of myself as a politically astute public servant.”*

Fifty-four percent of the respondents said that they considered their roles as local officials a long-term commitment. *“I love serving people,”* said one. *“I am grateful to the voters for the opportunity given me to serve them.”* Another said that the factors influencing her decision to stay involved in public office were *“a need to help my community, the will of the town folk, and my partnership with and for the good of our community.”* Still another noted, *“There’s a lot of work to do and we’ve only just begun. I’ll run again because if I don’t, I’ll be accepting defeat. The ‘political group in control’ would have won. So I’ll continue to stand strong and hope the people will rally ‘round.”*

Some said that they would continue to serve in local government even if not in their present position. *“I will, however, always be active in town government. I have an interest and expertise and believe that everyone must contribute something,”* a selectman wrote.

Women's Issues. Two decades ago a study by Hansen et al. (1976) found that as more women entered the pool of eligible candidates, the more women's issues and policy preferences would emerge on the political agenda. Later studies have shown that women officeholders tend to be more feminist, meaning believing in the equality of women in all spheres, and that women officials tend to be more liberal than their male counterparts (Antolini, 1984; Flammang, 1985; Kelly, 1991; Carroll et al., 1991; Thomas, 1994). These studies have demonstrated that although women in elective office are concerned with a broad range of issues, they are more likely than men to lead the way on policies affecting women and children. As a result, issues like domestic violence, children, sexual harassment, and women's health have received greater attention on the contemporary policy agenda as women have taken leadership roles.

Many of the respondents thought that serving in office gave them an opportunity to advance causes of importance to women. Sixty-two percent said that service in local government gave women the opportunity to have an impact on issues that affect women's lives, and 49 percent said that it had given them this opportunity personally. One respondent said, *"Certainly I wouldn't use my position to grandstand, but I can't say, when the opportunity arises, I don't take advantage."* A small-town selectman had a similar experience with women's issues. *"There have been issues and causes discussed and dealt with because of my position. I believe they moved along a little faster or came to the forefront quicker."* Another agreed that holding office gave her the ability to address women's concerns, but more importantly, she said, it gave her the *"opportunity to advance social causes that benefit everyone with a need."*

The respondents also had a sense of the importance of being a role model for other women. *"I feel I am doing some good for my town and for women seeking this office in the future,"* said a long-time selectman. *"I believe my presence has helped efforts to combat domestic violence and to promote town employment of women and minorities in leadership positions,"* said another.

In the focus groups, women officials had a definite interest in women's issues like child care and domestic violence, but they felt that the "basics"—roads, fire, police, the budget, etc.—had to receive priority, particularly in smaller communities. A small percentage of survey respondents (15 percent) thought that there were no such things as women's issues, and about 19 percent of the respondents said that there was no opportunity to advance women's causes.

One of the most salient themes to emerge from this study involved women's abiding sense of their own efficacy. The respondents expressed a strong belief that their presence could change both the style and the substance of government. One woman who chaired her board of selectman summed up this sentiment when she wrote that her commitment to her role as a local official was long-term because, *"I make a difference."*

CONCLUSION

This study of the opportunities and dilemmas of women elected municipal officials in Massachusetts underscores the paradoxes and complexities of women's emergence over the past quarter century in greater numbers and in more powerful positions in politics and government at the local level.

On the one hand, employment and educational opportunities have opened doors for women to succeed in positions of leadership and responsibility across a wide range of organizational and occupational dimensions. In response, women have seized opportunities to test their mettle, assumed positions of authority in both the private and public sectors, and overcome gender restrictions borne of sexist attitudes and negative stereotypes.

On the other hand, patterns of discrimination based on race and ethnicity continue to affect many women in American society who have not had the opportunity to run for political office. As this study points out, women who have benefited from educational and economic advantages have gained access to governing positions while women of color across the country tend to be marginalized from political leadership, even at local levels. Unfortunately, the women's movement in general and those groups promoting women in politics in particular focus too rarely on the disparities rooted in racial and ethnic distinctions. The need to address historically-based exclusions, can, at least in part, be addressed by the creation of viable programs and networks devoted to righting the racial and cultural imbalance among women in public office.

As this study has emphasized, women elected at the local level tend to be highly educated, white and economically advantaged possessing the time, energy and confidence to devote themselves to improving their communities through local office-holding. Serving on boards of selectmen, city and town councils and as mayors, they have ample opportunity to hone their budgetary acumen, negotiating skills and communication abilities. The focus group participants and respondents to the survey also expressed a strong sense of gender identity. For many, this identification was complicated by

problems of sexism which still arise in their professional lives. Most, however, were confident of overcoming gender bias among their colleagues or among voters.

But while a sense of gender identity is pervasive, the issue of differences related to racial identity was not explored in this study given that there are so few women of color serving in local elected office in Massachusetts. Not long ago a prominent former woman Massachusetts state senator, Patricia McGovern, speaking to a group of supporters for a woman colleague said, “It makes a difference who’s in the room when the door is closed and decisions are being made. Women should be in the room.” Clearly, the respondents in this study would concur that women, by virtue of their gender experiences bring a distinctive point of view without which inclusive political deliberations cannot be held nor fully informed decisions made. Such assumptions, however, also pertain to political inclusion based on racial and ethnic identity which doubtless has as much, if not more, of an effect on the development of political consciousness and insights as gender distinctions.

In short, the emerging trend of encouraging women to speak with political authority “in a different voice” has succeeded in many venues, but has yet to extend to women across the social spectrum of race and class. Studies such as this, for example, conceptualized by and written for and about white, middle-class women holding elective office, are inevitably limited by cultural bias and cannot draw general conclusions about women’s “political roles” in American society. African American, Latino and Asian women exercise considerable political influence and leadership in their communities, but only a few have had the opportunity to enter mainstream politics through elected public office.

The absence of women of color in this study of local municipal officials derives from deeply rooted structural barriers inherent in American politics, including highly segregated housing patterns, the concentration of people of color in urban districts, the modest salaries of elected officials, the remnants of white ethnic machine politics and the non-partisan, entrepreneurial nature of city and town politics. While these factors have also delayed the emergence of white women into government, the pathways to political power have proved far less accessible to promising political aspirants of color. This study shows that mentors and political networks have facilitated entree for women willing and able to serve in elected offices. Such vehicles for political access are even more indispensable for those whose ambitions have been thwarted by structural barriers related to race, ethnicity and cultural background.

A promising finding of this study is that women municipal officials are proud of their strengths in relating to diverse viewpoints and collaborating across party and ideological differences. These characteristics will be useful as the process of inclusion proceeds to incorporate greater diversity. Although women in politics span the ideological spectrum, research has found they are more likely than men to be more inclusive of marginalized populations and more likely to advance policy initiatives that bear directly on women's lives such as domestic violence, child care, women's health care, and the like. The subjective responses elicited in this study add support to the premise that women bring collaborative and humanistic perspectives to government based on their own life experiences.

But, as this study found, women municipal officials are anxious to do more than add a different perspectives to policy deliberations. They see the governmental process

itself as deeply flawed and in need of change. Many seek to alter traditional hierarchical structures in order to be more collaborative and focused on the “common enterprise” of serving the public good. Persevering despite gender-related obstacles has clearly given women elected officials a sense of accomplishment and confidence in their governing abilities. This optimism, when combined with advances in women's educational and occupational levels, has spurred dramatic growth of women elected at the local level.

Like all studies limited in scope and subject matter, this one suggests the need for further research regarding the road ahead for women in their quest for positions in state and national leadership. Many observers have looked to the increases of women at the local level as a means to produce a “farm team” for higher offices as state legislators, mayors and members of Congress, culminating ultimately in the election of America's first woman president. This study, however, presents a much more guarded portrait regarding the propensity of women local officials to run for higher office. Clearly, women local officials are willing to contribute their time, energy and intelligence to governing their communities, but few expressed ambitions to move “up the ladder” in politics and government. Because women occupy few of the more powerful and visible mayoralties and city council seats, they remain highly concentrated in suburban and rural areas where, as they report, they benefit from fulfilling work near to home. The prospect of commuting to the state capital or to Washington, D.C. was cited as a drawback to running for elected offices that require sustained periods of time away from families and communities.

Some may deride the inclination of women elected officials to remain at the level of local politics as unambitious. What this tendency probably indicates, however, is that for a large segment of American women, the responsibilities of family, home and career

outweigh the attractions of a more illustrious political role. Coupled with the daunting requirements of fundraising for major campaigns, the familial and community demands on women elected municipal officials appear to constrain their ambitions for higher office to a large extent. Furthermore, as this study points out, women municipal official possess a strong sense of their own efficacy and confidence in their abilities to govern at the local level

This study expands on the proliferating research on women in public life with the aim of adding insights for the development of future programs and policies by formal governing bodies and professional associations aimed at increasing and assisting women serving in public office. By taking account of differences between men and women in terms of experience, perspective and political power, this study, and others like it, can help identify opportunities and dilemmas for women public officials and forge new approaches to the serious business of governing collaboratively and effectively at all levels of government and politics.

APPENDIX

SURVEY OF MASSACHUSETTS ELECTED WOMEN OFFICIALS

Opportunities and Dilemmas for Women Municipal Elected Officials

General Information

Age _____ Race _____ Family Income (approx.) _____

Family Status: Married/Partnered Y—N—Children Y—N—Ages _____

Education: High School _____ Some College _____

College Degree _____ Major _____ Graduate Studies _____ Field _____

Occupation _____ Volunteer Work _____

What Office Do You Hold? _____ Number of Years in Office _____

Previous Office _____ Number of Years _____

Number of Years in Community _____ Size of Community _____

Are You A District Representative or Do You Represent Your Community at Large? _____

Have You Held a Leadership Position? Y—N—

Opportunities

1. What kind of strengths do women bring to municipal office?
2. What prompted you to run for office in the first place? Did a specific organization or mentor play a part in your decision? Were you recruited?
3. What are the professional and volunteer networks that facilitate women running for office and serving in government?
4. Does serving in local government open opportunities for moving up into higher office or enhancing your business or professional career?

5. In your experience, is being a woman an asset rather than an impediment to running for or serving in office in today's political climate?
6. From your experience, does serving in office give you an opportunity to advance causes of particular importance for women?
7. Do you think of yourself as being in politics or in public service?

Dilemmas

1. Are women treated differently by the press, and has this changed over time?
2. Are women treated differently by voters, and has this changed over time?
3. Do you think that women have a harder time than men in balancing family and work responsibilities?
4. Do you think that women have difficulty with direct confrontation or overt conflict? Is being "nice" a liability in politics?
5. Have you had a problem with sexism? If so, has it interfered with your ability to do your job?
6. Do you feel that you are hindered from moving up into positions of power and authority on the local level?
7. Are there problems that you are facing that you didn't expect to face? Could these problems make you reconsider continuing in public office?
8. Do you consider your role as a local official as a short-term or long-term commitment? What factors influence your decision?

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